



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Branding, Music, and Religion

Citation for published version:

Wagner, T 2014, Branding, Music, and Religion: Standardization and adaptation in the experience of the "Hillsong Sound". in *Religion as Brands: New Perspectives on the Marketization of Religion and Spirituality*. Ashgate Publishing, pp. 59-73.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Religion as Brands

Publisher Rights Statement:

Details of the definitive version are available at
http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&title_id=18974&edition_id=23768&calcTitle=1

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Branding, Music, and Religion: Standardization and Adaptation in the Experience of the “Hillsong Sound”

Tom Wagner
Royal Holloway – University of London
London, UK
thomas.wagner.2009@live.rhul.ac.uk

Abstract:

This chapter analyses the interplay of branding, music, and religious discourse at the London branch of Hillsong Church, an Australia-based trans-national evangelical Christian church that brands itself through its distinctive musical offerings. The production of the church’s music is centered on its flagship church in Australia, and disseminated across its network through standardized recorded and performative forms. Despite this standardization, interviews with congregation members based in Hillsong’s London branch revealed a branded experience of the music in which imagined ideas of London and Australia were shaped through extra-musical communication, giving otherwise objective elements of music distinct subjective qualities.

Keywords: Hillsong Church, Music, Branding, Glocalization

Introduction

Global brands, popular music, and evangelical Christianity are products of cultural flows (Appadurai 1990) that facilitate interaction between the “global” and the “local”, in what Roland Robertson (1995) has referred to as *glocalization*. Originally a marketing term, glocalization describes the processes by which “global” (usually western) ideas and products are adapted to local consumption contexts (ibid: 28-29). It expands the understanding of “locality” by eschewing “top down” or “bottom up” models of culture in favour of dialectical interactions (ibid: 30). For example, while McDonald’s has become shorthand for the “hegemonic rationalization of culture” (Ritzer 2010), Maharaja Macs in India and McLaks in Norway demonstrate local adaptations of its products. Once accepted, though, a brand like McDonald’s may become so ingrained in the “local” consciousness that its foreign origins are forgotten (Belk 2000). The global adaptation and transformation of popular musics such as Hip-Hop into sonic symbols of local identity speaks to similar dynamics (Mitchell 2001). By the same token, many forms of evangelical Christianity have shown a remarkable ability to glocalize, adapting to almost every socioeconomic and cultural milieu into which they are introduced (Robbins 2004).

Marketing, music, and religion can all glocalize because they are experiential vehicles for meaning making. As Robin Sylvan argues in his cross-cultural study of the religious dimensions of popular music, meaning in both religion and music is created by the interaction of multiple levels of individual experience – physiological, psychological, socio-cultural, semiological, virtual, ritual, and spiritual (Sylvan 2002: 19-44). This is also true of the meaning of brands, which has been studied by scholars

from each of these perspectives. For example, Lindstrom (2005) emphasizes sensory branding (physiological), Fournier (1998) treats brands as relationship partners (psychological), Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) explore “brand communities” (sociocultural and ritual), Manning (2010) focuses on brand semiotics (semiological), Book (2005) analyzes virtual world branding (virtual), and Muniz and Schau (2005) delve into religiosity in the Apple Newton brand community (spiritual).

The importance of experience in creating meaning has not been lost on practitioners of marketing, music, or religion. Several recent brand management books advocate encouraging “an almost religious zeal” in customers (Hanlon 2006: 4; see also Lindstrom 2005) and branding “like a rock star” (Jones 2012). The religious-like activities of music fans are well documented, perhaps no more so than those of Elvis devotees, some of whom create shrines to the King and make pilgrimages to Graceland (Harrison 1992). The intrinsic role of music in shaping religious experience has been evident to practitioners of the “great” religions for thousands of years (Beck 2006). More recently, the explosion of religious branding consultancies shows that marketing is increasingly being embraced by religious organisations (Einstein 2008). Although the marketing of religious experience is most familiar as a feature of evangelical Christian organizations, groups like the Jewish Kabbalah movement and the Japan-based Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai International show that sophisticated marketing efforts are a cross-faith phenomenon.

It is surprising, then, that while there have been several studies of music and branding, branding and religion, and religion and music, there seems to have been no attempt to study all three as a single rubric, even more so given acknowledgement of the roles of

both marketing and popular music in the megachurch movement (Sargeant 2000; Twitchell 2007). This chapter begins to redress this, positing the experience of brand, music, and religious discourse as a gestalt “Sound”. It takes as its case study Hillsong Church, the Australian megachurch whose brand is inextricable from its self-produced, internationally influential pop/rock worship music.

Hillsong’s music “product” is one (if not *the*) main driver of its growth (McIntyre 2007) – a glocalized offering adopted by Christian churches all over the world. Like McDonald’s, Hillsong focuses on the consistency of its product, and achieves it by standardizing production and delivery. However, while McDonald’s adapts the content of its product for local tastes, Hillsong does not. Rather, it offers a global musical product mix that is positioned through extra-musical communication and adapted by its worshipers through the frame of the brand in the local contexts in which it is offered and received.

The ethnographic data presented herein was collected during three years of research at Hillsong’s London branch as part of the author’s PhD project (Wagner forthcoming), which involved participant observation and interviews with Hillsong London’s congregation members, musicians from Hillsong’s London and Australian churches, and Hillsong Church’s trans-national leadership. This paper is organized as follows: First, I provide background on Hillsong Church and information on its business model, mission, and message. The next section discusses how Hillsong ensures consistency by centralizing the production of its music around its flagship Australian church and standardizing its delivery in live performance. I next develop the concept of a branded “Hillsong Sound” as a product of stakeholders’ social imagining of

places and people in the Hillsong network. This is followed by a description of an abandoned attempt to create a distinct “European Sound” at Hillsong’s London location by changing its musical product. The final section will give an example of Hillsong’s use of extra-musical communication in shaping worshipers’ social imaginations through a description of a video shown as a lead in to a weekly worship service at Hillsong London. The video positions the church as a “home” of overlapping communities that is a significant actor in a global evangelical project, glocalizing the brand and the music in the experience of the “Hillsong Sound”.

Background and Business Model

Head Pastors Brian and Bobbie Houston founded Hillsong Church as the Hills Christian Life Centre in 1983. It initially had a congregation of 45 that met in a rented school hall in the Baulkham Hills district, a suburb of Sydney. Today, around 23,000 worshipers a week attend services at its purpose-built 3,500 seat flagship church (which remains in Baulkham Hills), its three other Australian campuses and twelve extension services, as well at Hillsong-branded churches in major cities such as London, Kiev, Cape Town, Stockholm, Paris, Moscow, and New York City. Hillsong’s annual conference draws in excess of 28,000 people, while its European counterpart, the Hillsong Europe conference, draws about 16,000 people annually. The church’s beliefs and practices are rooted in Pentecostalism (Brian Houston is a former head of Assemblies of God in Australia), but its website does not align the church with a specific tradition (McIntyre 2007: 176). This is standard practice for

most “seeker” churches (Sargeant 2000). In this respect, then, Hillsong Church is better classified under a broad “evangelical Christian” rubric.

Hillsong is perhaps the most striking example of the confluence of sophisticated marketing techniques and popular music that has characterized the megachurch movement (cf. Sargeant 2000). To date, it has produced over 40 albums, sold over 11 million copies worldwide, and amassed over 30 gold and platinum awards¹. These albums are separated into product streams meant for specific target audiences. For example, *Hillsong Kids* features music produced for children and *Hillsong Chapel* offers acoustic arrangements of Hillsong’s songs for those who seek a “quieter” worship experience than that afforded by the electric guitar, keyboard, and drums driven originals. Hillsong’s global popularity, though, stems primarily from its two main product streams, *Hillsong United* and *Hillsong LIVE*. *Hillsong United* is the name of the band that grew out of the Australian church’s youth program. Fronted by Brian and Bobbie Houston’s son Joel, *Hillsong United* regularly tours the world, and is arguably the “Australian” face of the church. In contrast, *Hillsong LIVE* albums are meant to be the expression of Hillsong’s “global” network: while relying heavily upon the Australian church’s creative team, *Hillsong LIVE* albums incorporate singers and songwriters from different Hillsong churches around the world. Despite separate marketing programs, there is a good deal of crossover of artists and songs between them (Riches 2010; Riches and Wagner 2012), which helps promote an overall Hillsong musical identity. While Hillsong’s 23,000-person membership is relatively small, compared to megachurches that claim six-digit attendance, its worship songs have had an outsized influence on both the Australian and global Christian sonic (and

¹ <http://distribution.hillsong.com/help/about>. Accessed 08 June, 2012.

theological) landscapes (Evans 2006: 87-109). Every Sunday, songs written by its internationally known singer/songwriters such as Reuben Morgan, Joel Houston, and Darlene Zschech are heard and sung in thousands of evangelical and non-evangelical churches around the world².

Like most modern megachurches, Hillsong is structured and operates like a secular business. According to its website, its governance policies are “based on the Australian Stock Exchange (ASX) Principles of Good Corporate Governance and Best Practice Recommendations, together with adherence to foundational Biblical values³”. Senior Pastor Brian Houston is the head of its board of directors, which includes members with considerable business acumen, such as General Manager George Aghajanian, formerly of IBM, and Nabi Saleh, CEO of Gloria Jean’s Coffees. Unlike secular for-profit companies, though, Hillsong Church is a registered non-profit organization, so it is income tax-exempt. Additionally, it lowers its cost structure by relying on a high proportion of volunteer labour in almost all aspects of its functioning.

Full access to Hillsong’s financial dealings is restricted. However, a general picture of the church’s finances can be constructed from its annual report. Income is generated from donations (its members are encouraged to tithe), ticketed events such as conferences, and numerous products, including CDs, DVDs, Mp3s, and books. Its 2010 Annual Report listed earnings of \$64 million, with total assets of \$28.7m and income from conferences of \$6.7m (McMillan 2011).

² <http://www.ccli.com/licenseholder/Top25Lists.aspx>. Accessed 08 June, 2012.

³ <http://www.myhillsong.com/corporate-governance>. Accessed 08 June, 2012.

Hillsong's music is produced by its own publishing arm, Hillsong Music Australia (HMA), and distributed by EMI CMG in North and South America, and Kingsway Music in Europe and the UK. It can be purchased at church events like weekly services and conferences, through the Hillsong Music website, or via music download sites such as Amazon.com or iTunes. Aside from income generated from album sales, the church receives royalties paid by other churches who use its songs in services or other events. These undisclosed licensing fees, collected in part through the Christian Copyright Licencing International (CCLI) organization⁴, accounted for between 35 and 45 per cent of all its total musical royalties in 2011 (McKenny 2011).

Hillsong's mission and message is one of global transformation, seeking to "reach and influence the world by building a large Christ-centred, Bible-based church, changing mindsets and empowering people to lead and impact in every sphere of life"⁵. It does this by building a globally networked community of local churches, and by promoting its brand tagline, "Welcome Home", which neatly sums up its glocalization strategy. Because Hillsong strategically locates churches in major international cities around the world, its trans-national congregation is culturally and linguistically diverse. This diversity is apparent at some of its larger venues, such as Hillsong London, which serves around 8,000 worshipers weekly, translating its services into seven languages.

The "Hillsong Sound" – A Global Language?

⁴ <http://www.ccli.com/Global.aspx>. Accessed 08 June, 2012.

⁵ <http://www.hillsong.com/vision>. Accessed 19 August, 2012.

Musical style plays a critical role in creating and maintaining a sense of community and conveying social ideals (e.g. Blacking 1973; Rommen 2007). As such, Hillsong's music is key to the construction and maintenance of its global brand community and its brand identity. Its services provide an immersive experience for the congregation (Pine II and Gilmore 2011: 45-46), emphasising participation through singing and clapping, which also plays a key role in the socialization and emotional engagement that its members seek in a worship experience (Albrecht 1999).

Hillsong is, of course, not the first church to appreciate the role of music in forging bonds and communicating with its followers. Indeed, music has occupied a central place in the spiritual experience offered by almost every religion throughout human history (Beck 2006). This is especially true of experiential faiths, such as Hillsong Church, that seek an "ecstatic" or "transcendent" worship experience (Becker 2004, Rouget 1985). In these traditions, music and musicians are critical resources that facilitate a meaningful worship experience of the faithful. The HMA website highlights Hillsong's music as one of the church's "Christian Resources," which it offers to help achieve the following goals:

- To enable people to enter into a new dimension and atmosphere of praise and worship to the Lord.
- To empower people, ministries and churches through relevant, bible-based teaching, leadership and praise and worship.

- To share some of what God is doing here at Hillsong with other Christians around the world, as well as people outside of the Church.

(<http://distribution.hillsong.com/help/about>. Accessed 08 June, 2012.)

By positioning its musical offerings as Christian resources that can be used for worship and also as tools for church building and evangelical purposes, Hillsong differentiates its brand from the rest of the multibillion-dollar Christian music industry. This positioning is crucial to the branded experience of the “Hillsong Sound”.

Branding is imperative for any organization that aspires to a global reach (Targos 1998). In a globalized world, brands, music, and religion are all forms of cross-cultural communication. For a religious organisation like Hillsong, clarity of communication is paramount, because its brand is bound to a claim of biblical Truth – the understanding of which is inevitably culturally-inflected. As a trans-national church, then, Hillsong faces a challenge of “global” proportions: it must deliver a clear, consistent, and coherent message across a range of offerings, through many people, in a variety of cultural contexts. Complicating the matter is the fact that this message is often delivered musically: While music is often easily absorbed into a variety of cultural settings, it is also subjective, so its ability to reliably communicate meaning through either sound or lyrics is debateable (Negus 1996: 25-35). The culturally-specific medium of music thus presents Hillsong with unique opportunities for, as well as challenges to, communicating its brand to a trans-national audience.

Hillsong responds to these challenges by standardizing its music. Like food, music and religion are subject to the cultural norms and tastes of the localities in which they are consumed. For example, as noted earlier, McDonald's "glocalizes" in that it has a global strategy, in which it offers a standardized menu of products all over the world. However, it also practices a localization strategy by modifying some of these products or introducing new ones to appeal to the unique tastes of customers in different countries. Hillsong practices glocalization starting with the "Hillsong Sound", its global music offering. The "Hillsong Sound" begins as a standardized mix of products intended to communicate the fundamental message of transformation. These products are glocalized through extra-musical communication that adapts the Hillsong brand to its local context in each church in the Hillsong network. In the local worship context, individual members of Hillsong's congregations realize the meaning of the brand as they engage with and experience its music. Ultimately, the "Hillsong Sound" is inseparable from its worshipers' experiences of the Hillsong brand.

Although it is experienced in local contexts around the world, Hillsong's music largely originates from one place: its Australian church, the flagship location of the brand. The following section details the production process that seeks to ensure the level of cohesion and consistency that is necessary for the "Hillsong Sound".

Hillsong Australia: The Center of Production

A strong global brand communicates a consistent message across all of its offerings. One way to achieve this is through consistency of product. To ensure the consistency

of its musical offerings, Hillsong has a codified production process by which songs travel from inspiration to recording. First, a creative team member submits a song for consideration. Hillsong's core song writing team is comprised of salaried pastors like Joel Houston and Reuben Morgan who are both internationally known and also intimately familiar with the church's mission and message. From a branding perspective, it behooves Hillsong to maintain a core of songwriters who are both recognisable and able to articulate its message consistently and accurately. Thus, while it is Hillsong's official policy that any team member may submit a song for consideration, according to an Australian worship leader I interviewed, the identity of the songwriter may influence the decision making process:

[Hillsong] has an idea as to whose songs they'd like to see on the next album. So they want to see a couple from [well known singer/songwriters like] Joel [Houston], a couple from Rueben [Morgan]... There may be two from random people in the congregation or the team... but it's pretty set (Jordan, interview with author. 1 June, 2011).

When a song is submitted, Robert Fergusson – a Baulkham Hills campus senior pastor – reviews the song's lyrics to ensure that they are consistent with the church's teachings. If the song's message is deemed consistent with that of the church, it is then "field tested". This usually involves playing it in worship services at Hillsong's Australian churches, and observing the congregation's reaction. Since the primary goal of worship music at Hillsong is to afford a meaningful worship experience it is vital that worshipers engage with it. Therefore, if a song is received well, it will be retained. If not, it will either be discarded or re-written. Because songs are field-tested

primarily in Australian locations, those congregation members become the de facto arbiters of taste for the entire Hillsong network. From a “top down” perspective, Hillsong Australia is the center of production of the branded music that carries the “Hillsong Sound”, as it is written, tested, and approved in an Australian context.

It is tempting to label Hillsong’s music “Australian”. However, once it is released, the music is performed by Hillsong’s worship teams and experienced by individuals in myriad “local” contexts around the world, (perhaps arguably) most intensely in live group settings such as weekly worship services. Hillsong thus seeks a further level of consistency by standardizing how the music is delivered in live performances across its network of churches, where it is experienced in the social imaginations of worshipers.

Musical Standardization and Social Imagination

Hillsong’s members primarily learn new songs by listening to them outside of church and singing them in worship services⁶. Because worshipers are familiar with the recorded versions of songs, Hillsong’s worship leaders work to maintain fidelity to those recordings in live performances in the belief that too much deviation will distract the worshipers’ attentions from God. Because the music is performed in a variety of acoustic environments by a large number of musicians in a variety of languages, variation is inevitable. To mitigate this, Hillsong institutes a variety of

⁶ Most of the songs sung in a service during a given period are from the most recent *Hillsong United* or *Hillsong LIVE* releases. For Hillsong’s annual product cycle, see Riches 2010: 144-147.

“quality control” measures. For example, the instrumental and vocal make up of worship teams is nearly identical across all of Hillsong’s churches. Musicians learn to replicate parts as they are presented on album recordings. Additionally, click tracks are used to ensure that each performance is the same tempo regardless of who is playing the song or where it is being played. However, these attempts at standardization are moderated by an interdependence of place and identity that is equally, if not more crucial to the construction of the “Hillsong Sound” in the social imaginations⁷ of those who engage with it. For example, when I asked Hillsong London congregation members if they believed Hillsong London’s worship team to have its own “sound” or “style”, several responded in a manner similar to this 28-year-old woman who hails from London:

Our church plays everything faster and louder [than the Australian church], which *I guess is what you would expect from such a vibrant place* (Kimberly, email communication with author. 3 May, 2011. Emphasis added).

As noted earlier, this is not the case: Hillsong worship teams use standardised instrumentation and metronomes to ensure that worship songs in performance are consistent with the recorded versions. The music in Hillsong London’s worship services is meant to be, in an objective sense, the same as the music in Hillsong Australia’s services. Nevertheless, it is experienced by worshipers as faster and louder by virtue of its being played in London.

⁷ Here I am using “social imagination” in reference to Benedict Anderson’s concept of an “imagined community”, a community comprised of people who will never meet face-to-face but who nevertheless feel connected through mass media and the mediated images used to represent them (Anderson 1983).

The Hillsong London congregation members to whom I spoke also perceived Hillsong Australia and its music as more “laid back” than their own. One current member, who has spent considerable time in both the London and Australian churches, interpreted this in terms of culture:

There is a lot of overlap. I mean, you get into church and it’s Hillsong church, bigger and all of that. But it’s slightly different because it’s adapted to the culture, the Australian culture, so everything will be a bit slower (laughs), from the songs to – well, everything will be slightly slower (Emily, interview with author. 7 December, 2010).

Both Kimberly and Emily’s responses reveal that their perceptions – their social imaginations – of the location and the culture in which the music was produced influenced the ways they experienced it. Although there may be a “lot of overlap” between the cultures of the London and Australian churches, the relative difference in the tempos of life was perceived in the tempo of the music, despite the latter objectively being the same. The role of the social imagination, then, has implications for any glocalization strategy’s use of standardization and/or adaptation, as Hillsong’s experiment with a “Euro Sound” shows.

Hillsong London: The “Euro Sound” Experiment

Because of its strategic location, Hillsong London is Hillsong's main base for evangelistic activities in Europe. Its worship team regularly tours the continent, performing music from *Hillsong United* and *Hillsong Live* albums at events in a variety of countries and cultural settings. One worship team member spoke to me about the evangelical success Hillsong London enjoyed in Italy:

Well, actually (Hillsong London Senior Pastor) Gary (Clarke) said something about [touring] yesterday. He said they call it tours, but it's actually [evangelical] crusades. Because London goes to Italy, they go to Europe, and like a thousand people get saved in one night (Susan, interview with author. 6 February, 2011).

When I asked what accounted for this success, another suggested that Hillsong London's music has a distinct "Euro Sound":

The London stuff goes off really well in Italy.... It's "Euro", it's got its own flavour (Jordan, interview with author. 1 June, 2011).

This worship leader believed Europeans are more receptive to this distinct "Euro Sound" than they would be to Hillsong's Australian sound, which they might hear as "foreign". It should be remembered, though, that Hillsong London plays music that is primarily written and recorded by the Australian creative team members and strives to reproduce those recordings in concerts. The objective elements of the music are not being adapted by the church musicians to local tastes. Rather,

European “fans” appear to be experiencing Hillsong’s music as local through their social imaginations.

The challenge to Hillsong’s branding strategy, then, lies in managing how its music is “localized”. The difficulty of this can be seen in a previous attempt by Hillsong London to cater to European tastes by offering an extension to its sonic brand, an experiment that was eventually discontinued in favour of a branding model that standardizes the product and allows local churches to adapt the context in which it is offered.

From 2004 to 2008, Hillsong London released a brand extension in the form of four self-titled albums. Although the London church’s creative team wrote most of the songs on these albums, the music largely conformed to the overall rock-based style then coalescing between Hillsong’s *United* and *LIVE* product streams (Riches 2010). There was, therefore, little in the way of sonic differentiation between the London and Australian products. However, in 2007, London broke from Hillsong’s musical convention with the release of *Jesus Is: Remix*. In an innovative offering, this album remixed the rock-based songs of its 2006 release, *Jesus Is*, as dance tracks. Synthesizers and drum machines largely replaced the electric guitars and acoustic drums of the originals, significantly changing the musical aesthetic. Much of the Christian music media applauded this new “Euro Sound.” One reviewer wrote:

Passionate Euro-styled worship has been a core driving force for the explosive growth at the new Hillsong London church. A group of talented and creative

members of the church have taken 12 songs from the original *Jesus Is* worship project released in 2006 and remixed them from a pop and rock sound to electronic and ambient versions while maintaining the same lyrics and Biblical messages. Mixing a sound from their Hillsong Australia heritage with the current European/London music scene, this Euro-Worship has a fresh and exciting, yet familiar sound.

(<http://www.christianscampus.com/2010/04/hillsong-london-jesus-is-remix2010.html>. Accessed 21 August, 2011).

In this review, the importance of place in the construction of a branded “Sound” is apparent; the reviewer posits Australia as the “heritage” of the music (c.f. Gilmore and Pine, II 2007) while connecting the *Jesus Is: Remix* “sound” to an “European” music “scene” in London.

In (post)subcultural theory, a “scene” is defined in terms of the vitality and diversity of its musical life (Stahl 2004, 55; see also Straw 1991)⁸. A “happening” scene is one that supports a diverse array of musics and a large number of stakeholders involved and invested in musical activities. In contrast, a “dead” scene is one with few opportunities to hear or perform music, and little diversity in musical style. Interviews conducted during my fieldwork indicate that, to Hillsong’s musicians and congregation members, Hillsong London’s “Sound” reflects London’s status as a “happening” scene. The London “Sound” has a cosmopolitan “Euro-ness” that

⁸ As Stahl suggests, scenes “are dense array(s) of social, industrial and institutional infrastructures, all of which operate at a local and trans-local level” (2004: 55). Because of technological mediation, a scene can simultaneously be “virtual” and “global” as well as “local”.

reflects the diversity of London's scene. This diversity is held in opposition to the homogenous musical scene of Sydney⁹, as this Australian worship leader indicated:

Question: I've been asking if there is a "Hillsong Sound" and a "London Sound", and you seem to think there is.

J: Yeah, I do. I think that I was hearing... some Green Day influences, almost some Ska [On Hillsong London's first album]. And to me that's kind of indicative of England, where the Punk movement originated. I feel like that was something that was really appropriate. I also think that the Euro sound is so much more open to Electronica. I think they have a sense of that Soul influence in London. There are a lot of different influences that are just not present in Sydney (Jordan, interview with author, 1 June, 2011).

If the "happening" Euro-London and comparatively "dead" Austral-Sydney scenes produce different "taste publics" (Russell 1997), one might expect the congregation members of Hillsong London to prefer songs written by the London church's local songwriters. However, when I asked London congregants which they preferred, everyone I interviewed admitted a preference for the Australian songs. This preference was expressed by two of Hillsong London's congregants:

⁹ Interviewees from both London and Australia often used Sydney as shorthand when referring to Hillsong's Australian members and churches. Although Hillsong holds services in downtown Sydney, its flagship location is its Baulkham Hills campus. This is an example of the gravitational pull that "branded" cities exert on peoples' perceptions and expressions.

There's a lot of crossover between Hillsong London and Hillsong Australia, but most of the songs that I think are the better ones tend to be the Australian ones. (Jason, interview with author. 18 May, 2010).

It's weird, because at London, a lot of the good ones we sing are actually the Australian ones. Most of the ones London has written recently haven't been, I don't think, as good (Luke, interview with author. 23 November, 2010).

In 2011, the Hillsong London recording line was officially discontinued. The original intent behind the Hillsong London albums was, as many of my interviewees suggested, to create a distinct "Euro Sound" that would appeal to a European audience. However, this didn't work in the context of Hillsong's global branding strategy, as recounted by Hillsong's general manager, George Aghajanian:

Question: Could you tell me a little bit about why Hillsong London no longer records its own albums?

GA: I think we got to a point where we felt... we really wanted to make sure that Hillsong, when it was represented worldwide, didn't have a variety of different sounds. We wanted to make sure that everything we did was ultimately distilled onto one or two really good albums and not three, four, five, six different albums... with all different types of sounds. Because London has a very specific sound; Sydney's got a different sound; Paris would have a

different sound, and Kiev and so on¹⁰. So what we wanted to make sure of was that the Hillsong name and the Hillsong reputation for worship was preserved while at the same time being inclusive with what was happening with songwriters around different parts of the world... because if you have five albums, that's sixty songs you've got to come up with versus two or three really powerful worship albums that would then be the best experience for the greater Church (Interview with author. 28 September, 2011).

As Hillsong expanded, it identified a need to maintain consistency and quality across its product lines. To achieve this, it abandoned the attempt to create a distinct "Euro Sound" for Hillsong London in favour of a more coherent "Hillsong Sound" that could be recognised across product streams. This move towards standardisation involved centralizing the production of its music around its Australian church and standardizing the live presentation of that music in services across its network. However, despite the music being objectively similar across venues, the music is still experienced differently, depending on where and by whom it is being played, as it is adapted in the social imaginations of worshipers in their local contexts.

¹⁰ Hillsong Kiev produces its own albums in as a Hillsong brand extension. This highlights the role that language plays in brand translation. According to Aghajanian: "Remembering that the basis behind this is reaching people with the Gospel in song as well as in teaching, we take our worship experience, translate it, and release it into the Eastern European culture. That's why [in Kiev] they've probably had a little more autonomy to do some of these albums, and London really hasn't. Because London, being in the English speaking world, can contribute to our global expression of our worship. Kiev can't really because of the language issues" (Interview with author. 28 September, 2011). Another way Hillsong standardizes its product is by offering, free of charge, official translations of its songs (<http://distribution.hillsong.com/publishing/faq>. Accessed 8 June, 2012).

To manage the “Hillsong Sound”, then, Hillsong must go beyond musical standardization to try to shape how it is “heard” by its local congregation members. One way Hillsong does this is to position, by way of extra-musical communication, each local Hillsong city and church within the global Hillsong Church community, which is itself positioned as part of a global evangelical Christian project of Church building. An example of this is provided in the following description of the three-minute video that begins weekly services in every church in the Hillsong network. This video, which is produced specifically for each church (e.g., Hillsong London will present a different video than Hillsong New York) prepares congregants to “hear” the “Hillsong Sound” by using image and narrative to orient them toward certain ways of thinking about their city, their local church, and Hillsong Church as “home”.

The Hillsong Sound: “Welcome Home”

Sunday, 19 July, 2009. Hillsong London’s 6 pm service at the Dominion Theatre, London.

I have found a seat in row H of the Dominion Theatre, Hillsong London’s Sunday home in London’s West End, front and center for the 6 pm service. Since there are no tickets, you have to get there early. Around me, young, happy Christians talk excitedly to each other or rush to reserve the last seats for late-coming friends, silhouetted against a stage screen that reads “Welcome Home”.

Right on time, the lights dim. A menacing industrial groove replaces what had formerly been unassuming, ambient background music. The word "London" flashes across the otherwise dark screen. The iconic Tower Bridge appears for a moment, followed by a succession of momentary, herky-jerky shots of anonymous Londoners rushing about their daily lives. Gradually, the pace grows faster. The camera begins to zoom out, revealing glimpses of London signifiers: here, a glimpse of a man handing out free newspapers at a tube entrance; there, a red telephone box. As the visual stimuli increase, so does the music's insistence. Just as silhouettes of the London Eye and Big Ben appear, the screen goes dark again.

An instant later, a bird's-eye view of the Thames at sunrise appears as the music suddenly becomes upbeat. The sun shines directly into the camera, becoming a glint off of the giant golden statue of Freddie Mercury that sits atop the Dominion Theatre's entrance. Inside, the busy lobby is filled with people that many in the congregation will recognise as friends (they might even catch a glimpse of themselves). These shots appear in rapid succession as the music continues to grow livelier.

The screen goes dark for a third time as the music morphs into a crunching, metallic guitar riff. A spinning globe appears, overlaid with the Apostle Paul's words: "The church is not peripheral to the world, the world is peripheral to the church".

Ephesians 3:8-10 immediately follows, reminding the congregation that: "Through followers of Jesus like yourselves gathered in churches, the extraordinary plan of God is being known". This scripture shares the screen with images of people from around the world who, while nameless, are instantly recognizable by virtue of the ethnically

marked clothing they wear. These shots are juxtaposed with sweeping visions of masses of raised hands, signifying a large, exciting evangelical event such as a conference, concert, or the service that has just begun. Thus, the second half of the video situates London and the church in the larger evangelical project of Church building. “Church” is understood here as not only the local church, but also the church with a capital “C”, the global, borderless Body of Christ that is formed by believers. The video, which began with the single word, London, ends with a single name, Jesus. The band bounds on stage, seamlessly transitioning from the video’s soundtrack to the live worship music experience. The service has begun. (Author’s field notes, 19 July, 2009).

While an entire discussion could be devoted to the semiotics of the video described above, here I wish to focus on how Hillsong uses it to suggest ways of thinking about (and thus experiencing) the city of London, Hillsong London, Hillsong Church and the Hillsong brand in connection to evangelical Christian tropes of transformation and Church building. In order to do so, I borrow a metaphor from Timothy Rommen’s study of Full Gospel Christians in Trinidad: the Hillsong brand exists in “ever widening concentric circles” that move outward from the individual congregation, through the Hillsong network, to global Christianity (and beyond) (Rommen 2007: 41).

The first part of the video described above posits London as a place of promise and energy, but also one of loneliness and struggle. The second part of the video has a feeling of release from that struggle, a soaring journey above the Thames that lands at the door of the Dominion Theatre, the Sunday home of Hillsong London. Inside,

friends await. Hillsong London is depicted as a “home” – an answer to the struggles of city life. This “home” is part of another “home” – Hillsong Church, which the third part of the video casts in a transformational role, this time as a globally significant builder of the global Church. The video takes the viewer on a journey from the unnamed (but easily recognizable) “third world”, through an evangelical event that could easily be one of Hillsong’s annual conferences, to the “Body of Christ” – the name commonly used by evangelicals to describe the “global” Church.

Much of the efficacy of the branded experience of Hillsong’s music results from the connectedness that worshipers feel to the trans-national Hillsong network and the global Church. The “Hillsong Sound” is heard within a globally-oriented discourse that emphasises Hillsong’s ability to transcend boundaries. However, this is moderated by a simultaneous discourse that posits each of Hillsong’s churches as the “local church” of the individual worshiper. Thus, the “Welcome Home” message that greets worshipers in Hillsong churches around the world simultaneously references Hillsong’s individual churches, the Hillsong network, and the global Church; the “Hillsong Sound” may be promoted globally and *heard* in a local church, but it is *experienced* by its worshipers as a “glocal” phenomenon.

This chapter has explored some of the ways music, branding, and religious discourse coalesce as a branded “Sound” for Hillsong Church and its congregation members. It provides background on the church’s business model, including its “glocal” marketing strategy, and presents a case based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out at its London site and through interviews with members of its trans-national leadership. The experiences that its congregation members encounter when worshiping through

the church's music, which is presented in standardized forms, are derived from the gestalt of associations that is the Hillsong brand. The music is adapted in its members' social imaginations, which are themselves shaped through extra-musical communication that positions Hillsong as a "home" that exists simultaneously at multiple levels of (g)locality – a "home" that is a transformative agent in an evangelical project of Church building. The "Hillsong Sound" unites Hillsong's brand, its music, and evangelical beliefs in a single glocalized sonic experience. While this analysis is based on a single, context-specific case study, at the core of what has been discussed are basic forms of human communication and meaning making. Investigations along these lines in other religious, linguistic, socio-economic and cultural contexts will contribute to our understanding of the processes of communication and meaning making that take place in an increasingly glocal – and branded – world.

References Cited

- Albrecht, Daniel. 1999. Rites in the Spirit: A Ritual Approach to Pentecostal/Charismatic Spirituality. *Journal of Pentecostal Theology Studies* 17: 1-280.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983 [2006]. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. Ed. London: Verso Book.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1990. Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. In *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*. Ed. Mike Featherstone. 295-310. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Beck, Guy L., Ed. 2006. *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions*. Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Becker, Judith. 2004. *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Belk, Russell W. 2000. Wolf Brands in Sheep's Clothing. In *Brand.New*. Ed. Jane Pavitt, 68-69. London: V & A Publications.
- Blacking, John. 1973. *How musical is man?* Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Book, Betsy. 2005. Virtual World Business Brands: Entrepreneurship and Identity in Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming Environments. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=736823> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.736823>.
- Einstein, Mara. 2008. *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*. London: Routledge.
- Evans, Mark. 2006. *Open Up the Doors: Music in the Modern Church*. London: Equinox Publishing Ltd.
- Farias, Andree . 2005. The Hillsong Machine. *Christianity Today*. 7 May, 2005. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/music/interviews/2005/hillsong-1005.html>.
- Fournier, Susan. 1998. Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research. *The Journal of Consumer Research* 24, no. 4: 343-353.
- Gilmore, James H., and B. Joseph Pine II. 2007. *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Hanlon, Patrick. 2006. *Primal Branding: Create Zealots for Your Brand, Your Company and Your Future*. New York: Simon & Schuster Ltd.
- Harrison, Ted. 1992. *Elvis People: Cult of the King*. London: Fount.

- Jones, Steve. 2012. *Brand Like a Rock Star: Lessons from Rock “n” Roll to Make Your Business Rich & Famous*. Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group LLC.
- Lindstrom, Martin. 2005. *Brand Sense: How to Build Powerful Brands Through Touch, Taste, Smell, Sight and Sound*. London: Kogan Page.
- Manning, P. 2010. The Semiotics of Brand. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39: 33-49.
- McIntyre, E. H. 2007. Brand of Choice: Why Hillsong Music Is Winning Sales and Souls. *Australian Religion Studies Review* 20, no. 2: 175-194.
- McKenny, Leesa. 2011. Money Christmas: Hillsong Ensures Show in Tune with Spirit of the Season. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Online edition. December 11, 2011. <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/about-town/money-christmas-hillsong-ensures-show-in-tune-with-spirit-of-season-20111218-1p0vd.html>. Accessed 8 June, 2012.
- McMillan, Andrew. 2011. The Power in Grooving for God. *The Australian*. Online edition. October 28, 2011. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/music/the-power-in-grooving-for-god/story-fn9d2mxu-1226178790943>. Accessed 8 June, 2012.
- Mitchell, Tony. Ed. 2001. *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Muniz Jr., Albert and Hope Jensen Schau. 2005. Religiosity in the Abandoned Apple Newton Brand Community. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31, no. 4: 737-747.
- Muniz Jr., Albert and Thomas O’Guinn. 2001. Brand Community. *Journal of Consumer Research* 27, no. 4: 412-432.
- Negus, Keith. 1996. *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Pine, Joseph B. II and James H. Gilmore. 2011. *The Experience Economy, Updated Edition*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Riches, Tanya. 2010. *Shout to the Lord! Music and Change at Hillsong: 1996-2007*. Masters thesis, Sydney College of Divinity.
- Riches, Tanya and Tom Wagner. 2012. The Evolution of Hillsong Music: from Australian Pentecostal Congregation into Global Brand. *Australian Journal of Communication* 39, no. 1: 17-36.
- Ritzer, George. 2010. *The McDonaldization of Society*. Sixth ed. London: Sage Publications.
- Robbins, Joel. 2004. The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33: 117-143.

- Robertson, Roland. 1995. Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity. In *Global Modernities*. Eds. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson, 25-44. London: Sage.
- Rommen, Timothy. 2007. *Mek Some Noise: Gospel Music and the Ethics of Style in Trinidad*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Rouget, Gilbert. 1985. *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations Between Music and Possession*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Russell, Philip A. 1997. Musical Tastes and Society. In *The Social Psychology of Music*. Eds. David J. Hargreaves and Adrian C. North, 141-155. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sargeant, Kimon H. 2000. *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Stahl, Geoff. 2004. "It's Like Canada Reduced": Setting the Scene in Montreal. In *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture*. Eds. Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris, 51-64. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Straw, Will. 1991. Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music. *Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3: 368-388.
- Sylvan, Robin. 2002. *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*. New York: New York University Press.
- Targos, William. 1998. International Branding. In *Brands: The New Wealth Creators*. Eds. Susannah Hart and John Murphy, 123-134. London: Palgrave.
- Twitchell, James B. 2007. *Shopping for God: How Christianity Went from In Your Heart to In Your Face*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Wagner, Tom. Forthcoming. *Branding, Music and Transcendence: Hearing the "Hillsong Sound"*. PhD Dissertation: Royal Holloway, University of London.